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TAGS: [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [KTIA](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: GACA COMMENTS ON US-SAUDI OPEN SKIES AGREEMENT,
NEW TSA REGULATIONS

REF: A. 09JEDDAH444
[1](#)B. 09JEDDAH414
[1](#)C. 09JEDDAH178
[1](#)D. 09JEDDAH146
[1](#)E. TREIBER-FINSTON 2/2/10 EMAIL

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment. On February 3, Captain Mohammed Ali Jamjoom, Vice President Safety and Economic Regulation at the Saudi General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA), discussed issues needing to be resolved for the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to sign an Open Skies agreement (reftels). Jamjoom stated that if the U.S. can accept the "quite small" Saudi changes and a transition period before full sixth freedom rights, the parties should be able to initial an agreement, which would immediately enter into provisional effect pending full final approval by high-level Saudi authorities. Noting that GACA and TSA cooperate strongly to ensure passenger safety, Jamjoom expressed doubts about the efficacy and enforceability of new TSA in-cabin security measures and his hope that alternatives to full-body airport scans can be developed. We were pleasantly surprised at GACA's high level of interest in expediting Open Skies even after the Christmas bombing and subsequent TSA regulations. We request department's assistance in wrapping up these negotiations as quickly as possible since we believe concluding Open Skies will be a very welcome sign of our mutual interest in strengthening our relations. End summary and comment.

SIXTH FREEDOM RIGHTS

[1](#)2. (U) Econcouns informed Jamjoom that while the U.S. takes the Saudi proposal very seriously and is quite interested in concluding an Open Skies agreement, including sixth freedom rights is extremely important. Jamjoom told Econcouns that he believes that full open sixth freedom rights after a transition period will not be a problem, and that if the U.S. proposal on a sixth freedom transition period is similar to the Saudi proposal in principle the two sides could reach an agreement, especially if issues to be discussed were put in annexes. The Saudi aviation industry is divided about concluding an Open Skies agreement with the U.S., with some thinking they should "be brave enough to accept additional competition" and others "more conservative."

DATE OPEN SKIES AGREEMENT BECOMES EFFECTIVE

[1](#)3. (U) Noting that the U.S. proposed agreement had a hard

date for entry into effect, Econcouns asked Jamjoom why the Saudi counterproposal removed this fixed date from Annex II. Jamjoom explained that it "takes time" for international agreements to be fully approved through the Saudi system, noting the agreement will need to be forwarded to the Council of Ministers and Council of Experts for consideration. Once the parties agree on a text, Jamjoom suggested, they can initial the agreement and begin to implement it before final official approval (e.g., the agreement would be provisionally applicable before official entry into force). Discussing how to initial the agreement, Jamjoom personally favored a public ceremonial signing with press coverage to show the U.S.-Saudi relationship is in good shape.

SAUDI OUTLOOK ON AVIATION

¶4. (U) Asked about the Saudi industry outlook on the future of aviation, Jamjoom replied the industry didn't do too badly. Although Hajj aviation decreased in 2009 because of H1N1 fears, traffic overall has been quite stable and the aviation industry has not significantly decreased. The problem is not traffic by itself, it is that the Saudi fleet is not configured to take advantage of existing passenger loads. Current volume does not justify big aircraft, so Saudi Arabian Airlines is now correcting its fleet. The Airbus 320 "hit the right spot" and has built on it; the Boeing 787 looks promising, but the 777 is too large for many operators.

U.S. ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION; RESTRICTION IS VISAS

¶5. (U) Traffic on North American routes has been significantly stimulated by the number of students on King

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Abdullah scholarships. Saudi Arabian Airlines is considering destinations beyond New York and WashDC, especially Orlando. The U.S. is still an attractive destination for Saudis, offering value for money and a wider variety of attractions -- the restriction is visas, Jamjoom concluded, asking when full visa service will resume in Jeddah.

NEW TSA REGULATIONS

¶6. (U) Sharing his view of the new TSA regulations, Jamjoom said that while SAG adheres to its agreement with TSA to implement screening for U.S.-bound flights, he personally doubted the efficacy and applicability of some new in-cabin measures, such as restrictions on using the toilets during the last hour of the flight or banning blankets on laps. Speaking as an ex-pilot, Jamjoom opined that protection in the aircraft is too late; no one in the aircraft should be a threat. Jamjoom also questioned whether some of the new rules could be implemented because of cultural differences, commenting that flight attendants on Saudi airlines are foreign workers, and will not be listened to and obeyed by Saudi passengers. In terms of security at the airport, Jamjoom wondered if there are alternatives to mandatory full-body x-rays of all passengers, such as optional hand searches by same-gender security staff. (Note: GACA was intensely criticized in the Saudi media this month for allegedly receiving a memo from TSA outlining new security procedures directed at Saudis on U.S.-bound flights -- a charge the GACA spokesman has publicly denied.)

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) We were pleasantly surprised at GACA's high level of interest in concluding expeditiously the Open Skies agreement. GACA is aware that it would offer Saudi airlines significant additional flexibility in serving and expanding the U.S. market, driven in part by politically important King

Abdullah scholarships. If we can get the wording right, we think Saudi Arabia will quickly accept the changes which will produce a very welcome sign of our mutual interest in deepening our relations. End comment.

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